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Experts' conceptualization exploration for digital influencing effectiveness

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Abstract

Over this past decade, the expansion of social media has notably impacted consumer behavior. Many companies reacted to this change and turned their attention to digital influencing to engage their target audience more and more. This study aims to explore the experts' perspective practice in relation to influencing through a qualitative study that particularly has the objective to help us to be closer to the business field's insights about this strategy.

Key words: Marketing, Digital Influencing, social media, Brand, Strategy

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1. Introduction

Over the last ten years, we have witnessed a significant global digital transformation affecting partnerships between advertising figures and brands that they endorse. These changes concern the nature, frequency, content or the form of their collaboration.

Today advertisers cannot overlook the obvious power of expression, interactions, and instant sharing that social media facilitates. For advertising, these new

channels offer to businesses the opportunity to engage with consumers through less expensive ways than traditional mass media.

Indeed, due to their widespread reach on digital platforms, social networks provide numerous innovative opportunities for advertisers. The use of these tools is not only crucial for consumers' day-to-day existence but also forms part of brands' daily communication requirements to interact directly with fans and shareholders (Schlüschen, 2016).

A synthesized literature review will introduce this article, defining social media influencing. Then we will present our empirical qualitative study to describe the practitioners' perspective. Before presenting and discussing the results, we will provide detailed information about our methodological approach. In conclusion, we will focus on the study's limitations and present our proposals for future research.

2. Theoretical background

Influence is the affecting power of a person, an idea, or an event. Influencer marketing, as defined by Brown and Hayes (2008), is the act of an external person influencing the consumers' buying choices. According to Singh and Sonnenburg (2012), the digital influencer holds an outsized influence over peers due to how they create and share content online. Influencers can be well-known figures, assimilated like other celebrities into dynamic tools with both attractive and likable qualities (Atkin and Block 1983). Companies aim to transfer these qualities to products through marcom activities (Atkin et Block, 1983, Erdogan 1999).

Digital influencers attract millions of followers by sharing content from their daily lives on social networks (Chapple et Cownie 2017). There are several media-driven numerical classifications of influencers, most of which are based on number of followers (Kay, Mulcahy, and Parkinson, 2020). Various types of influencers stand out in the digital world, concerning followers volume, we can distinguish between macro, micro, nano, and mega influencers (Gómez 2019). The number of followers is often used as a starting point in the search for the right influencer (Kay, Mulcahy, and Parkinson, 2020). Concerning a look at current influencer practices Gross and Wangenheim (2018) outline the difference between snoopers, informers, entertainers, or infotainers influencers. We can also differentiate between a celebrity influencer and an influencing celebrity (Marwick, 2015).

An influencer is termed a celebrity influencer when his popularity is derived from his achievements in art, sport, media, or any other professional expertise. An influencing celebrity is someone who gains

popularity solely through the virtual world of social networks, where he/she creates his/her celebrity. Influencing celebrities don't may possess a specific talent but excel in building a community through content creation centered around particular interests such as well-being, cooking, fashion, beauty, decoration and education (Van Norel, Kommers, Van Hoof, & Verhoeven, 2014).

Social media become a popular advertising platform and a significant means to promote company products and services (Pawar, 2014). Nowadays, they are recognized as an important tool (Koetsier, 2013) enabling businesses to create unique opportunities and reach target audiences at very optimized costs (Kotler & Keller 2016). Indeed, one of the advantages of influencing is its less intrusive and more engaging nature especially when we compare it to other online ads. Besides, it appears as a more reliable and trusted source (Freberg et al., 2011).

Various research studies point to the positive impact of influencer marketing in engaging fans. This engagement is indicated by likes increase and comments that often double the reactions to posts on brand pages (Schlüschen, 2016).

Additionally, the appeal of this communication practice is justified by consumers who claim to be ten times more impacted when a message is relayed by a human opinion rather than directly promoted by the brand (Kantar, 2017).

Nielsen Catalina Solutions (NCS, 2019) has conducted a study to investigate the impact that influencing creates on sales in a store. They compared group 1 which was exposed before to influence with group 2 who was not. The results indicate that the group 1 was influenced and tended to purchase more

products from the promoted brand compared to the competition (Chapple and Cownie, 2017).

Therefore, digital influencing plays a pivotal role in various aspects of consumer behavior, affecting information search, purchasing attitudes, and post-purchase communication (Mangole & Faulds, 2009). The changes brought about by social media in how people communicate, interact, and manage their relationships further support the decisions of managers who invest in this strategy.

In its binnings, digital influencing was a simple means of informal entertainment. Nowadays, thanks to the growth of communities and the proliferation of affiliations, it has successfully established itself as a communication strategy, serving as an orientating vector for marketing strategy.

3. Theoretical Framework

To study influencing marketing and better understand its impact on brands we mobilized the theoretical framework of social influence theory that uses source models and the match-up hypothesis. Basically, the phenomenon of social influence involves any dyadic relationship between two agents in which one party attempts to persuade or influence the other one (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986; Chaiken, 1979). For example, the relationship between a business and a consumer, the relation between a seller and a consumer, or between a consumer and another one. The theory of social influence aims to explain the mechanisms of third-party influence on consumer behavior and distinguishes between two influence

processes in advertising. In these two ways the person could probably adopt a behavioral posture which is similar to that of one or more other person: these two ways are the process of identification and the process of assimilation (Kelman, 1961; Basil, 1996).

According to this theory, influence on social media occurs when the target identifies itself with the influencer and aspires to be perceived like him/her, or when the person aligns itself with the values that the influencer believes in. According to this theory, the effectiveness of influence, varies based on the profile of the influencer and the nature of the promoted product/service. The theory of social influence creates the attractiveness and credibility models that are mainly used in advertising (Jaoued, 2011).

The attractiveness model exposes a correlation between the effectiveness of an advertising message and the characteristics of the source. In our case, it shows the correlation between the effectiveness of the ad message and the digital influencer characteristics. McGuire's model (1985) affirms that known, appreciated, and perceived sources are considered as similar to the consumer. This generates attractivity and creates a positive impact on consumer behavior. Indeed, Patzer (1985) argues that physical attractiveness serves as an information signal, leading to unavoidable effects. Baker & Churchill (1977) and Chaiken (1979) research demonstrate that more attractive sources can generate positive stereotypes for consumers. Attractive sources lead to positive changes like belief changes and greater purchasing intentions more than unattractive spokespersons (Friedman et al., 1976; Petroschius & Crocker, 1989; Petty and Cacioppo, 1980). McGuire (1985) suggests that the message's effectiveness depends on

three constructs: similarity or the perceived resemblance between the source and the message owner, familiarity or the awareness people have about the source through exposure, and sympathy that represents the affection gained by a source through its physical appearance and behavioral attitude.

In a different point of view, Ohanian (1991) and Solomon (1996) based the message effectiveness on the notion of credibility. The credibility model they present considers two dimensions: the expertise level of the message and the perceived reliability of this source. Their model postulates that sources who exhibit expertise and reliability are credible and, consequently, more persuasive. Consequently, information from a source, such as an influencer, could modify the beliefs, opinions, attitudes, and/or behavior of a consumer when he accepts to be influenced by this source because he appreciates her personal attitude and value structure.

Reliability is the first dimension of the credibility model. It depends on the target audience's perception (Erdogan, 1999) and refers to the honesty and integrity perceived by the audience from the source. The trust that the consumer can have in the objectivity of the information provider (Ohanian, 1991). Expertise is the second dimension of the credibility model.

It indicates the level of perceived knowledge of this source. It focuses on the experience, know-how, or particular talent of the promoter (Hovland et al., 1974). In this model, the significant knowledge is on the level of expertise as it is perceived by the audience, not the real expertise as assessed by the experts in the field (Hovland et al., 1953; Ohanian, 1991).

4. Match-up hypothesis

The match-up also called the congruence hypothesis is defended by social influence theory and supports that the effectiveness of an advertising message depends on the consistency of the two of influencers and the product's message (Forkan, 1980; Kamins, 1990). This research focuses on good harmony between the image of the influencer and that of the brand as the most relevant determinant for the success of a third-party implication in advertising message. The effectiveness of an advertisement would therefore depend on the existence of a perceived fit between the source and the brand (Till and Busler 1998).

If we consider the congruence hypothesis, the alignment between the product and influencer relies on the attributes they share. The correlation between the product's characteristics and the influencer's image determines the match-up. The perceived "fit" between the celebrity's image and the brand hinges is the degree of congruence (Misra and Beatty, 1990).

According to the match-up hypothesis, having positive characteristics for both the celebrity and the products is not enough; there must be a perceived positive relationship between their attributes (DeSarbo & Harshman, 1985). Kanungo and Pang (1973) contend that a "match" enhances consumer evaluations of the product and the advertisement. Lack of congruence impact negatively reactions to the advertisement, and affects credibility, brand memorization, the attitude toward the ad, the attitude toward the brand, and the purchase intentions (Kamins & Gupta, 1994; Misra & Beatty,

1990; Kamins, 1990; Kahle & Homer, 1985; Till & Busler, 2013).

Despite the increasing interest in scientific research on this practice, influencer marketing still has areas of ambiguity, and related knowledge remains limited (Schouten, Janssen, Verspaget, 2020). The study aims to explore marketing managers perspectives on evaluating influencer marketing practice as a strategy. How do they perceive it? What decision-making processes and criteria guide their collaborations with influencers? What, in their point of view, are the key success factors ensuring the effectiveness of influencer marketing for their brands? These questions will be addressed through a field survey, adopting a contextualized and updated "practitioner" approach. The study will utilize a qualitative method, employing semi-structured interviews with actively engaged experts.

5. Research Methodology

In our qualitative study, we chose semi-structured interviews to collect information from experts. We have targeted high marketing decision-makers in Moroccan and multinational fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG) companies. The interviews were guided through predefined themes for the interview guide as methodological tools. We employed a convenience sample that respects the representativeness and saturation principles. The sample was determined by the expert's activity sector and by their recent collaboration with a digital influencer (less than 1 year). Our sample is composed of 7 experts from various companies: Procter & Gamble (Hygiene), Lesieur-Cristal (Oil), L'Oréal (Cosmetics), Moony (Flour), Monster (Agrifood), Centrale Dairy (Milk),

and Sultan Teas (Agri-food) (Refer to appendix 1).

The interview guide surrounds a list of themes to follow during the interview. The order of these themes indicates a prevision in the potential flow and maintain a logical sequence. Additionally, the three main themes in our interview guide were serving as a structural basis for the content thematic analysis (Refer to appendix 2).

To organize the collected data from verbal interviewer's responses transcription, we have implemented a general reading grid. This grid was set up for a manual thematic content analysis. Our approach involved both horizontal and vertical reading techniques from transcribed responses and was based on it to extract meaningful verbatims.

6. Findings

6.1. The General Perception of Influencing Marketing by Experts

This theme points to two perceptual sides from the interviewed experts.

1. Positive effects

The positive side includes the expeditious build-up of awareness and the outstanding emotional attractiveness that are particularly built thanks to influence

- Action on awareness

Interviewees identify awareness as a highly consistent determinant and significant advantage of influencing marketing.

"Influencer marketing enables rapid awareness building. We engaged this

blogger to overtake the awareness issue and outstrip the confusion by introducing a trusted third party who presents our brand and products" (Expert #6).

"Advertisement through influencing facilitates the brand education process for us. It not only allows its fast integration on the consumer's mind but helps us to save time also" (Expert #3).

- Emotional attractiveness

Experts put attention on the significance of the emotional link between the consumer and brand thanks to influencing.

"The affection that this consumer has for this blogger, along with her ability to identify, strengthens the attachment to our brand, turning it into brand love" (Expert #5).

"When we collaborate with an influencer, it is to reinforce our brands and to generate consumer brand love towards our brand" (Expert #7).

- Positive perceptual value

Thanks to the influencer support, the personal perception value became more positive. According to our experts, the overall judgment on brand superiority can be influenced by a collaboration between an influencer and a brand.

"For me influencing has an impact on consumer behavior but it is an indirect impact... When the product is promoted by an influencer, the consumer considers the message more. The brand is seen as a serious brand when it gives itself the means to pay a person to be its spokesperson. It brings more value in the consumer perception." (Expert #1)

"When we know your brand, we know your benefits, but we don't believe in them. The influencer acts positively by

adding a trusted third party to the product, it reassures the consumer..." (Expert #3)

"To assess if this digital representative helped me to overcome my business issue, it was a barrier to consumption caused by the boycott that our brand faced last year. Indeed, I was able to evaluate the reduction of negative associations through qualitative post-campaign studies after the collaboration." (Expert #6).

2. Negative effects

The negative side of influencing includes the notion of "risk" in associating the influencers to the brand/product image. This risk has three main dimensions: the lack of control over the influencer partner's behavioral aspect, the absence of control over the influencer's future partnerships and the influencer's lack of expertise in managing his content.

"You know, people evolve and are getting developed, even with trackers we can check on their historical practices we can never control their future behavior " (Expert #5).

"For me, the biggest issue when we deal with influencers is that we don't have enough control on them. Our brands depend on their image" (Expert #4).

"Our professional partnerships could fail because of the anarchy and lack of structure of influencing... Sometimes, i see celebrities and influencers doing everything and anything on net, just to make money. Why? because they are badly managed or maybe are not managed at all by professional agencies " (Expert #7).

6.2. Influencer Marketing Decision Making

Decision-making regarding influencing marketing goes down into three categories: The outsourced decision, the internalized decision, and the hybrid decision. Experts take into consideration consulting agencies, internal marketing/communications functions, and collaborative efforts between advertisers and agencies.

We identified three types of decision-making:

1. Outsourced Decision

Actors: Consulting and/or creative agency, media agency, digital agency: "We usually share the problem with our agency, whose job is creation. For us, it is their responsibility to provide us with creative proposals. When we briefed them, they came back to us with solutions to overcome our consumption brakes. In influencing our mission is more to arbitrate, determine the sweet spot between the values of this spokesperson, and to study the awareness verses and how much it costs" (Expert #7).

2. Internalized Decision

Actors: Marketing or communications function: Product manager, brand manager, marketing director, or communication manager

"The process is done internally 100 % and it is based on our feeling... because as marketers we are the brand's warranters. An external provider is not able to understand our needs better than us" (Expert # 5).

3. Hybrid Decision:

Actors: Advertiser/agency

"The collaboration idea was initiated after the brief by our agency. We intuitively opted for one of the various options that they proposed. We had an idea about the profile

we wanted but the agency helped us a lot to study all the alternatives" (Expert # 3)

6.3. The main success Factors of influencing in social media

The three main success factors that the experts identified are the quality of choice that depends on the match-up between the influencer and the brand, the influencer's popularity, and the influencer's credibility. The sustainability factor that is seen as vital to establishing the influencer-brand association, and the effectiveness of the 360° campaign.

1. The quality of the choice

The content analysis of our expert's interview shows that the most important criteria to ensure the quality of choosing good influencers are congruence, popularity and credibility.

- Match-up / Congruence

Our interviewees are confirming the importance of the perceived fit between the influencer and the promoted brand in order to guarantee the collaboration's success.

"When we are in reflection about the adequate influencer for our campaign, we ask the question: Is this influencer able to attract to our target? This match-up between the influencer, the brand and, my target is mandatory" (Expert #7).

"My brand representative should show similarities to what brand manifests; their personalities must be similar" (Expert no. 3).

- Popularity

Influencer's audience community size represents an important criterion for brands : "The most important criteria for us is the reach of this influencer and the extent of his influence. He should have enough

quantitative reach in terms of the audience to collaborate with us" (Expert #1).

"The influencer is my opportunity to benefit from a large audience, the consistency of his community should be profitable" (Expert #4).

- Credibility

"To be an effective communication tool we seek the influencer image that has to be clean in my consumer's eyes. To avoid lack of credibility, we track any bad buzz, any historical political or sexual scandal with, any association with competition" (Expert # 2).

2. The collaboration sustainability

Durability is factoring a key factor to success in influencing collaboration

"To have a real impact on our brand we are conscious of the importance of temporal sustainability on this partnership at less than one or two years. That gives time to the consumer to connect the brand to its ambassador" (Expert#1).

3. The Overall Effectiveness of the Campaign

Regarding our leader's point of view, attention should be focused on the overall 360° campaign execution effectiveness. They consider a lot the relevant role of the influencer as an amplifier.

"The influencer is a guide for our consumer, he is the significant red string of our holistic campaign" (Expert# 4).

"The coherence of the campaign execution is mandatory. The consumer journey with the influencer should be on

social media and amplified on the other communication channels.” (Expert #1).

6.4. Discussion

The previous results consider influencing as a positive practice. Despite all the risks associated with influencers' behavior, that brands cannot control. Experts focus on its crucial role in proximity creation and strong associations building between brands and consumers. It calls attention to its positive contribution to rising awareness, to build emotional attachment, and improving brand perception.

The process of decision to adopt an influencing strategy in a campaign involves internal and external participants., Its success depends on choosing to sweet spot influencer but also on the durability of collaboration between the influencer and the brand. The study insists on the necessity of the overall holistic effectiveness of the campaign. These results contribute to enriching scientific research about the subject. It enriches insights about influencing from the expert's perspective. The insights about the temporal factor importance and the holistic mastering are particularly relevant.

The trend of influencing marketing is relatively recent. Specialized agencies and advertisers are working on the multiple challenges they confront and they try to conduct more tests to improve their strategy's efficiency to optimize their profitability. Even though influencing is nowadays a focused subject for professional controversies in companies, there are some gaps related to the subject in scientific research. Our exploratory study tried to provide insights and enrich the scientific literature by highlighting this issue through

the practitioner's point of view by trying to bring us closer to the expert's perceptions, usage, and associated levers.

Our results revealed a general positive perception. According to them, the practice creates proximity thanks to the human incarnation of the brand's voice. Our interviewees believe that it is synonymous of effective influence strategy on social media. They consider influencers as a bridge that links brands to consumers. Positive effects include building the brand awareness, strengthening the emotional attachment to the brand, and improving the positive perceptual value.

Influencing marketing has a positive impact on the consumer's ability to identify with the brand. According to the experts, it improves the sentimental side embodied by the digital character who represents the brand. They affirm that sympathy and affection towards the influencer are transferred to the brand. This can lead to creating an emotional attachment between the consumer and the endorsed brand. Using an influencer in an advertising campaign improves the judgment of the target audience. The experts observe that after an efficient use of influencer marketing the superiority becomes effectively stucke to the consumer's mind.

7. Theoretical implications

Our experts noted several positive points. They align with previous research opinions, such as the reactions to influencers' post's positivity in terms of likes and comments, as it was declared by Schlüschen (2016). It joins Chapple and Cownie (2017) about the emotional connection that can emanate from the perception of trust and similarity felt by

followers. Several researchers (Mangole and Faulds, 2009; Colliander and Dahl, 2011; Matthews, 2013; Lee and Watkins, 2016) place elements directly linked to behavioral aspects at the top of the list our research results don't.

The flip side of using influencing is the risk-taking because of the dependence between the influencer/brand pair. Among the most mentioned risks, we cite the lack of control over the influencer's behavior and the unpredictability of his/her actions, the undeniable impact of their subsequent collaboration partnership choices, the weak structure and supervision of certain influencers, and the lack of strategic thinking of the influencer's advertising choices. These risks are aligned with the previous opinion shared by many scientists who particularly noticed the behavioral hazard of influencing (Erdogan, 1999; Kim & al., 2014; Tripp et al, 1994).

Three types of decision-making scenarios about influencing in the companies were presented: the fully internalized decision-making (marketing teams), the outsourced decision-making (360° advertising agencies or digital agencies), and the hybrid decision-making (booth).

As for the key factors in the success of using influencing as a marketing strategy, we highlight three essential points: the quality of the influencer, the sustainability, and the overall homogeneity of the communication campaign. The first key factor of success is how we choose an influencer which depends on compliance with certain selection criteria. Experts join the literature linking the effectiveness of an advertisement with the existence of a perceived fit between the source and the brand (Till and Busler 1998 so the match-up between the brand/product and

the endorser as a key factor. The popularity of this influencer is mandatory as presented in these comments agree with those in the literature review. McGuire (1985) suggests that the effectiveness of the advertising message depends on the awareness people have about the influencer through his exposure. The credibility is also highlighted to assess the influencer's profile performance joining Ohanian (1991) and Solomon (1996) who have established the message productiveness on the credibility informations which could modify consumer's opinions and attitudes. Results highlights the importance of the temporal consistency as a key factor in the success of influencing. Making durable partnerships guarantees the partnership with an influencer's success. It helps to perpetuate the association between the peers and makes the partnership more effective. Finally, the communication campaign coherence from a holistic view added a real impact to the influencing campaign. The two last points constitute key information provided by our research, as we know it was never been presented in scientific essays before.

8. Managerial implications

The first aim of this essay was to offer insights about influencing from the expert's perspective and to reinforce knowledge about the managerial point of view regarding this practice. The managerial perception of this practice is positive, except regarding some potential risks, especially in relation to the challenge of controlling the influencers human behavioral aspect. Our research discloses the particular lack of supervision in emergent markets like the Moroccan one. It shows a real opportunity for digital

management agencies who are interested in positioning themselves in this business.

Our findings also outlined the criteria most highly valued by FMCG practitioners in influencer effective selection. It emphasizes on the match-up between the influencer and the endorsed brand. The influencer must be enough popular and reliable.

In conclusion, the study contributed significantly by revealing the key success factors that define the effectiveness of this practice according to FMCG experts. These factors include the quality of influencer selection, the sustainability of collaboration between the brand and the influencer, and the overall 360° execution of the communication campaign led by this influencer.

9. Limitations and Further research

Our research can serve as a potential starting point for additional research, aiming to enrich the understanding of influencing marketing practice and its complexity. This exploratory study tried to evaluate marketing expert's practice and identify its specific characteristics, the associated processes, and their key factors to ensure its successful implementation. As with any academic essay, our work has limitations. The first refers to the contextual approach, where the findings and results are from the Moroccan market. The second limitation is the sectoral approach we choose to adopt for this study. We propose for future research to explore areas across different sectors that extensively employ this practice, such as the jewelry markets, telecoms, or real estate sector. The third limitation is linked to the qualitative approach limitations where we opted for a small convenience sample due to our wish to exclusively interview senior decision-makers

(directors/ brand managers). This profile is rare and the challenge in reaching and convincing this sample to participate as information sources were big. Our results need operationalization, validation, and quantitative testing in different contexts to enhance scientific validity and we are conscious that this exploratory study represents just an initial step in the research process about influencing marketing.

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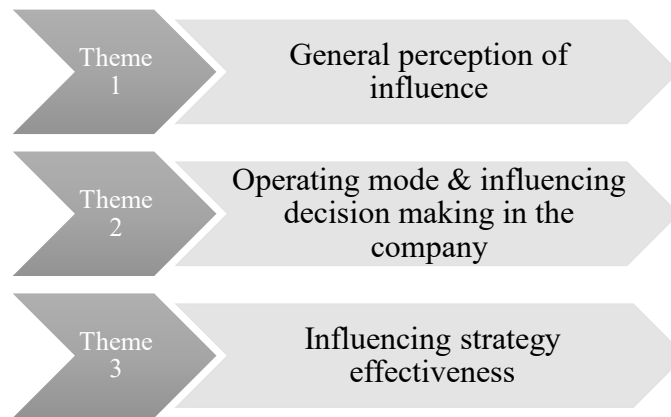
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Appendix



Appendix 1: Sample composition



Appendix 2: Pilot themes of the exploratory interview